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# WHAT THEY SAY AND DO: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AS A NATIONAL SECURITY LENS

By Eric Patterson

**C**ounterintuitive to the traditional national security expert, who still tends to focus on “hard power” factors like tanks, ships, and nuclear weapons rather than “soft” issues like human rights, religious freedom can be newly envisioned as a comprehensive framework through which to name and analyze the ideational impulses and resulting policies of leaders and regimes that pose risks to US national security. This essay briefly introduces US international religious freedom policy and then challenges national security experts to consider how religious freedom can be a lens for evaluating the motivations, policies, and future trajectory of threats to US national security interests and objectives. More specifically, by looking at (a) a country’s political pronouncements, (b) how it treats its own people, (c) how it acts in its neighborhood, and (d) how it acts on the international stage regarding religious liberty, the United States can achieve a thoughtful, additional lens for evaluating national security concerns.<sup>1</sup>

## US International Religious Freedom Policy

American citizens tend to see religious freedom as an inherent right, one that is expressed and protected in the First Amendment of the Constitution:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The United States also has a long tradition of supporting religious freedom within the modern human rights framework (as Katherine Marshall argues in this same issue), most notably as a signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Furthermore, because almost every country has signed on to the UDHR (not legally binding) and the ICCPR (a legally binding treaty), the United States sees its promotion of religious and other civil liberties as simply calling other countries to live up to their commitments. In particular, Article 18 of the ICCPR commits countries to the following:

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1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

In addition to its multilateral commitments, the United States has undertaken concrete actions to promote religious liberty worldwide for nearly four decades. That leadership began in the Cold War with concern for the plight of Soviet Jews and later Soviet Pentecostals. In 1974, Congress passed the Jackson–Vanik Amendment, which linked trade relations with the Soviet Union to the freedom of Jews and others to emigrate. The following year, the Helsinki Accords resolved the territorial status of the Soviet Union, linking that issue to a substantive human rights agenda that included religious freedom.

In October 1998, President Clinton signed the International Religious Freedom Act<sup>2</sup> which was established to

- declare that the “right to freedom of religion undergirds the very origin and existence of the United States” and that “Freedom of religious belief and practice is a universal human right and fundamental freedom...”;
- create an independent US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to make recommendations to the President and Congress;
- designate an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom at the US

Department of State, leading an Office of International Religious Freedom;

- mandate an Annual Report on International Religious Freedom to include every foreign country in the world;
- provide a menu of options for US government action to name, shame, and punish violators of religious freedom, with a special focus on “Countries of Particular Concern”;
- institutionalize training, programming, and recognition for US diplomats engaged in this work.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this unique history of efforts to respond to egregious violations of religious human rights, the US government has made very little progress in truly integrating international religious freedom into the mainstream of national security policy processes. While laudable gains have been made in expertise within specialized institutions (USCIRF and the State Department IRF Office), these institutions and the issues they champion have largely been treated as peripheral rather than essential to core national interests.

A sign of the lack of practical prioritization of these issues is how long it has taken successive administrations, both Republican and Democratic, to appoint an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. President George W. Bush took more than a year to name and place a new Ambassador at Large. This delay proved to be indicative of a persistent problem. While important work on behalf of persecuted religionists of various faiths worldwide occurred during Bush’s eight years in office, religious freedom did not appear to be a key policy priority and was certainly not integrated into national security and foreign policy, despite its mention in the 2006 National Security Strategy. The Obama administration stumbled along for nearly 18 months without an Ambassador at Large. Furthermore, although the White House had suggested that it would elevate this and other issues to a position within the National Security Council, observers at home and abroad (particularly religious minorities in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere) could see little significant strategic traction on these issues beyond the

reporting that the State Department provided through its annual International Religious Freedom Report. President Obama did give a widely praised speech in Cairo in June 2009, in which he at least rhetorically emphasized religious freedom. The president argued that “People should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul,” and he approvingly cited the ways that religious freedom is good for a society: respect for others, tolerance for diversity, interfaith dialog, and “interfaith service ... [such as] combating malaria in Africa, or providing relief after a natural disaster” (Obama 2009). Four years later, however, it is fair to ask what practical impact, if any, these words had, and if in fact they might have made the regional situation worse by raising expectations without meaningful follow-up.

### Religious Freedom as a National Security Lens

This brings us to the question: could religious freedom serve as a meaningful and practical lens through which to attain a better understanding of national security? Wolfers (1952, 485) wrote, “Security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked.” What is “valuable” to Americans? At a minimum they want to protect their lives, livelihoods, and way of life. Another way of saying this is that Americans want to ensure their physical, political, and economic security and to do so within the constellation of prosperity, opportunity, and freedoms that are their heritage, and for which they continue to strive.

Furthermore, Americans well understand that domestic security is inter-related with international security and has been at least since the Second World War. The efforts to rebuild Western Europe as well as fallen foes Japan and Germany demonstrate the complex, multi-faceted approach of American foreign policy to

the questions of national security: the United States invested in the security and well-being of others, even former enemies, because it realized that international security affairs are not always a zero-sum game. US security is inextricably rooted in the conditions of global power politics, trade, and ideological currents. Many Americans naturally recognize that mutual definitions of security include individual liberties rooted in law: religious liberty, the freedom to speak, publish, and assemble as well as basic legal and property rights.

In 2013 and beyond, how can the US government best understand the changing characteristics of the various threats to national security? How can it best understand the evolving power structures of global affairs? In addition to traditional security thinking, a useful way to deepen understanding of the nature and level of threat posed by foreign adversaries is by adding the lens of religious freedom analysis to our calculations. If the value of religious freedom can motivate a non-zero-sum view of the human condition and inspire respect for inherent human dignity and freedom of conscience, then one method for considering national security threats is to ask four simple questions vis-à-vis religious freedom:

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A USEFUL WAY TO DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE AND LEVEL OF THREAT POSED BY FOREIGN ADVERSARIES IS BY ADDING THE LENS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ANALYSIS

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- What do they say (ideological and political commitments)?
- How do they treat their own citizens?
- How do they treat their neighbors?
- How do they act on the international stage?<sup>4</sup>

### *What Do They Say?*

The first question has to do with the religious-political ideology and derivative public pronouncements of the regime. Perhaps the two most famous 20<sup>th</sup>-century examples of this kind of ideology can be found in the writings and public speeches of Adolf Hitler, who clearly laid

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out a rationale for German hegemony long before 1939, and of Vladimir Lenin, whose 1902 treatise, “What is to be Done?,” laid out the need for a “vanguard of the proletariat” long before the Cold War. In his *Mein Kampf* as well as later writings and speeches, Hitler’s religio-political extremism was plainly articulated: his passionate hatred of Jews and his desire for their ruin; a sense of German nationalism that incorporated all the elements of culture, religion, and tradition in service of a national, Aryan identity; and a sense of destiny in pursuing an expanded German empire (at the expense of his neighbors). The regime persecuted its own citizens and then bullied its neighbors. Throughout, Hitler’s views on church and religion are of interest: he derided Judaism and other faiths and sought to control, purge, and remake the German churches as appendages of National Socialism. Dissenters, most famously Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were imprisoned and in many cases executed. The religio-political extremism of Soviet Marxism–Leninism likewise illustrates the point. During the Cold War, Soviet threats were taken seriously because they were rooted in a well-developed, militantly atheistic political ideology of struggle, confrontation, and conquest that Lenin first laid out and Stalin and others made their own (Khrushchev’s famous shoe-banging incident at the UN was merely a reflection of this mindset that he had grown up in). Moreover, those threats often translated into geo-political probing from Berlin to Tehran to Pyongyang.

In today’s world, a particularly acute example of religio-political ideology that should be taken seriously is that of Iran. When Iranian leaders screech about the “Great Satan,” it is clear that this viewpoint is rooted in an overt, reactionary political theology (or what Tibi (2012) calls “religionized politics”) that justifies suicide bombings and terrorism. It is this same religious rhetoric and worldview that expanded the concept of martyrdom as a collective political good throughout the 1980s, resulting in thousands of Iranian suicide attackers and human minesweepers during the Iran–Iraq war.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, the ruling elites of Iran have sketched out publicly a comprehensive vision for the

greater Middle East that includes a wider role for Shia leadership, the end of the Israeli state (as well as a denial of the Holocaust), significant limitations on religious minorities at home, and the end of the American presence and security guarantees in the region.

For our purposes, it is important to note that Iran is repeatedly cited as an egregious religious freedom violator by the US Department of State and USCIRF. Indeed, when Iranian political and religious leaders trumpet anti-Christian, anti-Sunni, anti-Hindu, and anti-Jewish slogans, this is not mere rhetoric: it is the tip of the iceberg of political repression justified by religionized nationalism and prejudice. Not surprisingly, this is also the country that attacked Coalition troops in Iraq, “swarmed” US patrol vessels in the Persian Gulf, and has threatened oil shipments leaving the region—all justified as actions in a global Shia struggle against the USA and its allies.

In sum, rhetoric indicating religionized politics and lack of religious freedom provides a powerful 21<sup>st</sup>-century lens for considering national security. To be sure, national security experts will need to see beyond mere political rhetoric that is not rooted in actual deeds. Discerning security analysts can tell the difference between the occasional bluster and political rhetoric that is rooted in an explicit religio-political ideology. In some countries, rhetorical anti-Americanism can seem extreme, yet in reality many of the country’s elites are more than happy to work with Americans. A case in point is Venezuela. Hugo Chavez has been a blustering critic of America, but Venezuela continues, year after year, to be one of the top five oil suppliers to the United States.<sup>6</sup> In many other cases, however, rhetoric is not mere words. On a global scale, national security analysts should consider whether the likes of Tehran, Islamabad, Azawad, al Qaeda, or Boko Haram clearly articulate an explicitly anti-religious freedom political platform and if that is a signal of wider, nefarious intentions that threaten US interests.

### *How Do They Treat Their Own Citizens?*

US national security experts should ask, “How does such and such regime treat its own people

and does this have an effect on international security?” In some cases, like Burma, the tragedy of authoritarian dictatorship has little international impact. In other cases, like the Soviet gulag system, the ideas and techniques of that system were exported to Soviet satellites around the world.

A scholarly literature is developing that analyzes the way a regime treats its people with regard to religious freedom and how these factors relate to other economic, social, and political indicators (see the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life website at <http://www.pewforum.org>; Grim and Finke 2011; Hertzke 2012; Marshall and Shea 2011; Seiple and Hoover 2004; Seiple, Hoover, and Otis 2013; Shah, Philpott, and Toft 2011). Scholars have demonstrated that religious freedom is a critical release valve for public expression, public assembly, free speech, and property rights. Societies characterized by religious freedom tend to be more peaceful and to score higher on numerous indicators of social well-being. In other words, it is empirically verifiable that religious freedom is in a society’s practical self-interest.

But the flip side of this same coin is that societies characterized by legal restrictions on religion (e.g. penal codes) or societal restrictions on religion (e.g. unofficial but nonetheless dire practices followed within families and communities) tend to be less stable and more violent. And this violence and radicalization, of course, has security implications for other nations as well. Grim and Finke demonstrate the correlation between religious liberty and the likelihood of radicalized religious groups turning to violence. A country that decisively limits the religious freedom of its citizens is likely to radicalize some of them, as those individuals push back against the regime. A case in point is Saudi Arabia where there is essentially no religious freedom. Saudi Arabia is the breeding ground of radical Islamists determined to use violence to realize their political ends: it was local Muslims who attacked the Grand Mosque in 1979, and

thousands of “Afghan Arabs” left the peninsula to fight in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It is from Saudi Arabia that 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers originated, not to mention “foreign fighters” who played a destabilizing role from the Balkans to Iraq.

Another example is the case of Pakistan. Pakistan’s constitution officially supports “democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance, and social justice, as enunciated by Islam.” However, the Pakistan Penal Code (revised 1986) has severe punishments for “blasphemy” and “apostasy.” A 1974 constitutional amendment forbids Ahmadis, who consider themselves to be Muslim, from calling themselves “Muslim.” Recent

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domestic cases are evidence of societal tensions, such as an incident in February 2012 when individuals in military uniform stopped a bus and killed 16 travelers based on their allegedly Shia names. The previous year two senior government officials were assassinated for their support

for Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian alleged to have defamed the Prophet Muhammad, who received the death penalty. The religious and cultural chauvinism exhibited at home is fueling violence domestically and also broader “clash of civilizations” politics.

Governments that repress religion at home are not likely to support global human rights and they are often incubators of violent extremists. Additionally, conflicted societies and repressive regimes are not simply violent at home: they typically are destabilizing influences on their region as well and thus they can be a threat to US national security interests.

*How Do They Treat Their Neighbors?*

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union publicly derided religion, persecuted people of faith, and bullied itself into the affairs of its neighbors. Its official ideology of dialectical materialism (and thus state atheism) allowed it to deride Muslim neighbors (e.g. Chechnya, Dagestan, and Afghanistan) as primitive savages and thus justified policies of expansion.

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Likewise today the religious freedom lens is useful for considering regional dynamics, and this is important for a superpower with global interests like the United States. For example, Iran is not only bellicose in its rhetoric and aggressive in targeting domestic religious minorities and dissidents, but also a destabilizing regional influence. Tehran supports authoritarian religious groups and tyrants across the region. Iranian proxies have killed Coalition forces in Iraq, destabilized Lebanon, murdered Jews and Israelis, and attacked targets in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Iran's foremost foreign ally, Hezbollah, is believed to have been involved in the Khobar Towers bombing (in Saudi Arabia), the hijacking of TWA 847 (Egypt), the 1994 bombing of a Jewish Center in Buenos Aires (Argentina), and attacks on diplomatic posts in Georgia, India, and Bulgaria in 2012 (*New York Times*, 19 July, 2012; National Counterterrorism Center n.d.; Reuters 2012; World Jewish Congress 2012).

What is interesting for the national security analyst is to consider the justification for the violence and how it relates to the stated religious-political program of such groups. Iran provides a religious (and often racial) justification for attacking Israel as a nation of Jewish interlopers in the Middle East. Hezbollah, despite having been elected to a role in Lebanon's fractured parliament, continues to publicly call for the destruction of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Similar language emanating from Iran justified martyr operations in Iraq against US and Coalition targets over the past decade.

### *How Do They Act on the International Stage?*

Religious freedom analysis is a useful lens for distinguishing those groups and regimes that are "all talk" from those that are in deadly earnest. On the international scene, it is a lens that sharpens focus on the extent to which a regime uses transnational networks and international bodies to spread religious restrictions around the world. A couple of examples illustrate the point.<sup>8</sup> Consider first the case of Iran's response to the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, a fictional book that many Muslims found

offensive. In 1989, Iran's Grand Ayatollah Khomeini called for "all zealous Muslims to execute quickly wherever they find them" Rushdie and anyone else involved in publishing the book (Eliason 1989). Numerous violent attacks and murders did in fact occur, and Rushdie has needed constant security. Consider also the case of Sudan's reaction to a 1994 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Sudan, a report which criticized Sudan's penal code as being inconsistent with international human rights agreements the country had signed. Sudan held its penal code to be shari'a-based, and the Sudan delegation responded to the report by calling it "flagrant blasphemy and a deliberate insult to the Islamic religion, for which the author of the report must be interrogated and condemned" and "brought to justice" (February 18, 1994, letter from the Permanent Representative of Sudan to the United Nations, as quoted in Marshall 2011, 58).

It should come as no surprise that regimes that are willing to go to extreme lengths internationally to stifle any speech that could be construed as critical of a religion are also the kinds of regimes that tend to cause security problems at home and abroad. This reality adds urgency to the ongoing controversies at the UN over the campaign by many Muslim-majority states to pass a resolution banning "defamation of religion." While the Organization of Islamic Cooperation has recently made welcome statements in support of UN Resolution No. 16/18 (which shifts the emphasis away from "defamation" to combating intolerance), it has a long track record to overcome. If a ban on "defamation of religion" were to ever gain serious legal weight, it would effectively gut the ICCPR's legally binding protections for global religious freedom, and thus give regimes a free hand to punish dissidents and minorities at home as well as take legal action against those who "defame" Islam.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the "walk the talk" consideration is also what makes non-state groups like al Qaeda and Hezbollah different from other Islamist organizations: a violent political ideology put into practice via armed force. Today, similar violence crosses borders from places like Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Libya, and Afghanistan.

Finally, in addition to international initiatives like “defamation of religion” bans or the activities of extremist transnational non-state actors, there are other transnational threats to international religious freedom, such as when a government persecutes a global religious figure or when it nationalizes or appropriates the property or institutions of a religious organization, or when it persecutes religious groups, organizations, and minorities at home and abroad. The religious freedom lens reminds us that the Chinese government’s actions today with regard to Muslim Uighurs, the Dalai Lama, the Vatican, and the Catholic Church more generally, as well as missionaries and religious aid workers, have been clearly authoritarian and repressive, and deleterious to global security.

### Conclusion: Implications for National Security Institutions

How should national security experts determine if the ideas, ideology, and political program of foreign actors actually are an imminent threat to US national security interests? This essay argues that the ideas, actions at home, behavior in one’s neighborhood, and actions on the international stage with regard to religion and religious freedom paint an important portrait as to whether or not there is a high-level threat to US interests. Just as the Soviet Union’s words and deeds restricting religious freedom were a signpost of a larger pattern of repression and conflict, so too today behavior and rhetoric on these issues can help the United States navigate the fluid contemporary strategic environment.

This approach suggests a number of implications for national security institutions. First, nuanced understanding of the causes and consequences of religious freedom violations demands a different way of training analysts, soldiers, and diplomats. The US national security community needs to bring more comparative politics, religious studies, and cultural studies into traditional “international relations theory” approaches to security education. US institutions will also need a greater depth of embedded religion and culture experts who can provide this analysis from within government. Also, adding

the religious freedom lens—and indeed a wider human rights lens—to national security should change who is regularly “at the table” in national security discussions. For example, as discussed in my book *Politics in a Religious World: Building a Religiously Informed US Foreign Policy* (Patterson 2011a), a stronger Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and an Assistant Secretary for Human Rights should have direct access to, and work closely with, the senior-most leadership of the State Department, Pentagon, intelligence community, and National Security Council.

During the Cold War, the US government reached out to civil society, academe, and the private sector to assist in countering the ideas and actions of communism. The US government should act similarly today (Patterson 2011b) by

- supporting academic inquiry into the nexus of security, religion, and human rights in order to inform policymakers;
- engaging America’s corporate leaders to convince them to desist from financially supporting egregious religious freedom violators; and
- building international coalitions of the willing to counter advocates of religious repression and restrictions.

Most importantly, however, is that the strategic relevance of religious freedom to US national security be prominently affirmed and declared a policy priority by American national security leadership—starting with the president. In its second term, the Obama administration should communicate unambiguously to all departments and agencies involved in national security that religious freedom analysis must be mainstreamed in the policy process.

Adding the religious freedom lens will have many benefits, not least of which will be more sophisticated capacities for prioritization of the national security agenda. There are many bad actors around the world, but must America take them all on? Of course not. However, at times it does seem as if the US government is inconsistent in its policies and spread thin by trying to engage every country at all times around the world.

The religious freedom lens, when added to traditional national security analysis, can assist in narrowing the field of priority targets for concern and engagement, and can increase the chances that US responses will be contextually constructive rather than clumsily counterproductive. For instance, nuclear-armed states like Pakistan, and oil-rich states like Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, will naturally be of concern to the United States and should be prioritized for national security interest over those authoritarian regimes that mean little to the current national interest, like Burma or Cuba.

But to fully appreciate what makes Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria a greater security concern than many other states that have oil and/or nuclear weapons, US security analysts need to develop a deep understanding of the religio-political characteristics of these regimes—especially as regards chronic violations of religious freedom. In sum, the religious freedom lens provides a way of assisting in the prioritization of threats to US national security interests and the application of multiple elements of national power to help reduce these threats. ❖

1. The author thanks Katherine Hamilton for research assistance on this article and the editors of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* for providing thoughtful counsel.
2. For a detailed history of the political debate at the time and the establishment of IRFA, see the summer 2008 (Volume 6, Number 2) issue of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, especially the following essays: Shea (2008) and Hanford (2008). These essays derived from the symposia discussed below.
3. The year 2008 was the tenth anniversary of IRFA becoming law and a series of activities marked the milestone including a special issue of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, the publication of a book on US foreign policy and religious liberty by the former director of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom (Farr 2008), and three symposia on IRFA co-sponsored by the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) and Georgetown University, which resulted in a policy recommendations brief for the Obama administration co-authored by Georgetown's Thomas F. Farr and the IGE's Dennis R. Hoover (Farr and Hoover 2009).
4. Upon discussing this framework with a dozen other scholars, I concluded that there is no existing scholarly reference in the literature that uses this precise security framework. However, important similar work has been influential on my thinking (see Brown 1970; Van Evera 1999; Walt 1987; Wolfers 1962).
5. See the special issue of MIT's *Iran Analysis Quarterly* titled "Iran, Rogue State" for multiple articles on Iran's theocratic rhetoric as justifying collective and individual violence (Volume 2, Number 4, 2005).
6. In 2011, Venezuela accounted for 11 percent of total US crude oil and petroleum product imports (US Energy Information Administration 2011).
7. Hezbollah's English website continues to post its 2009 manifesto which suggests that the eradication of Israel is a goal, such as referring to Israel in quotation marks as a sign of Hezbollah's refusal to recognize its right to exist. Available at <http://www.english.moqawama.org/essaydetailsf.php?eid=9632&fid=54> (accessed November 1, 2012).
8. The following draws upon Marshall (2011).
9. It is noteworthy that the traditional Defamation of Religion language is Islam-centric, but that after 15 years of controversy the US-led coalition blocked this language in 2011; not surprisingly, the issue reared its head again in September 2012. For an overview of the issues, see Reuters (2011). For the primary source documents and resolutions put before the United Nations, see UN Watch (n.d.).

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